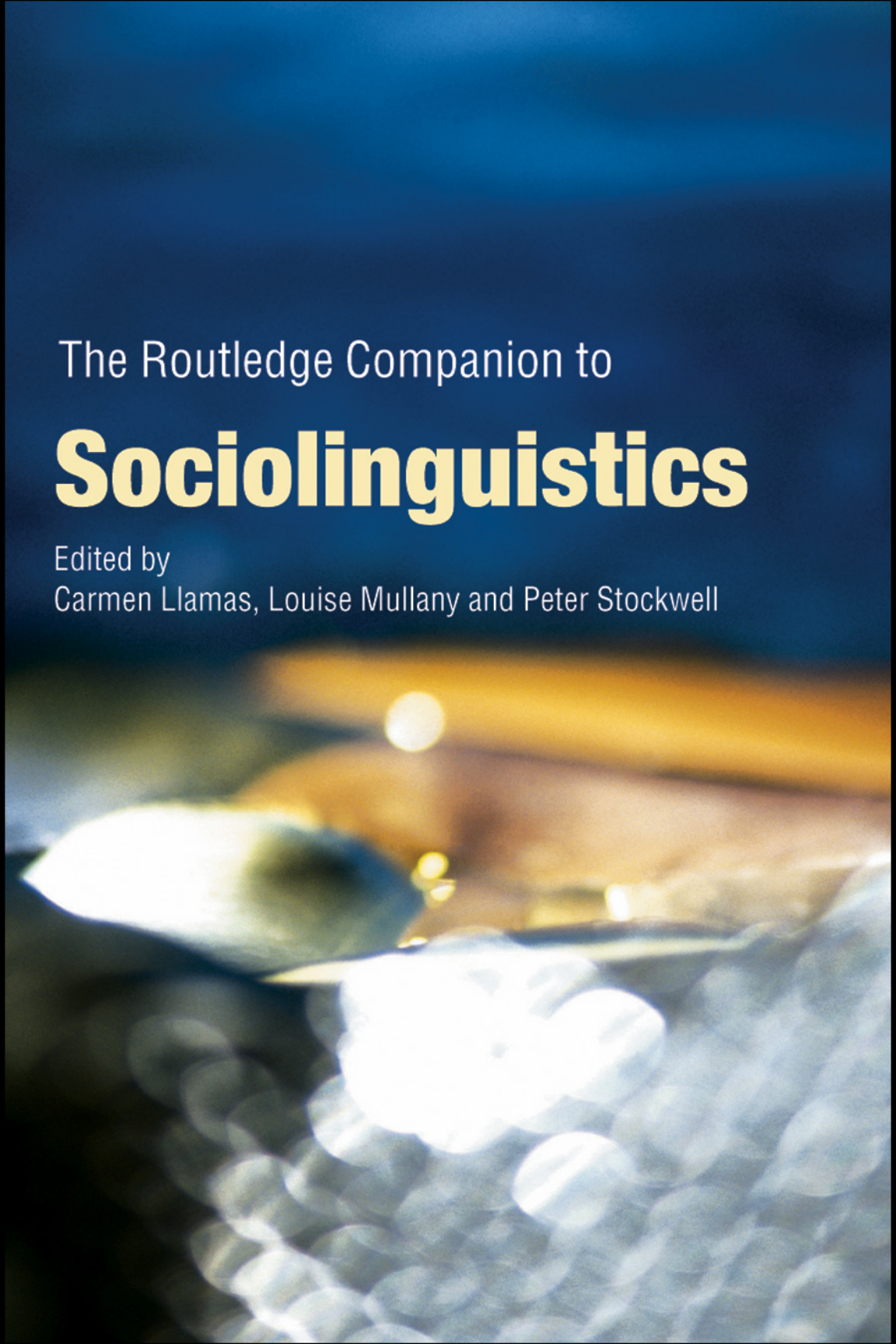




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THE IDEOLOGY OF THE STANDARD LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION: THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIFORMITY

Many widely used languages, such as English, French and Spanish, are regarded as each possessing a **standard** variety, and this affects the manner in which speakers think about their own language and about language in general. We may say that speakers of such widely used languages, unlike speakers of some less well known languages, live in **standard language cultures**. In such cultures, **language attitudes** are dominated by powerful ideological positions that are largely based on the supposed existence of this standard form, and these, taken together, can be said to constitute the **standard language ideology** or ‘ideology of the standard language’. Speakers are not usually conscious that they are conditioned by these ideological positions: they usually believe their attitudes to language to be common sense and assume that virtually everyone agrees with them. We shall discuss this further below: first, we need an outline of the process that is involved in the **standardization** of a language.

Standardization applies to many things besides language: it applies to weights and measures, for example, and to many kinds of object, such as electrical plugs and fittings and factory-made objects generally. In these instances it is desirable for functional reasons that the exact value of each measure should be agreed among users, and that each relevant object should be exactly the same as all the others of its kind. Thus, as a process, standardization consists of the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects, and so the most important structural property of a standard variety of a language is uniformity or invariance. This means – ideally – that every sound should be pronounced in the same way by every speaker, and that all speakers should use the same grammatical forms and vocabulary items in exactly the same way. (It also implies that the language should not undergo change.) In principle, therefore, when there are two or more variants of some linguistic form, only one of them is admitted into a standard variety. For example, although the expressions *you were* and *you was* are both used in English, only one of them is considered to be the standard form. To fulfil the requirements of standardization alone it would not matter which of these **variants** were the one accepted: standardization merely requires that one, *and only one*, of them should be accepted. In practice, however, the choice of one over the other is affected by factors outside the standardization process itself, and these factors, taken together, are what constitute the standard ideology.

The ideal of absolute uniformity is never achieved in practice. Although language standardization discourages variability, no language is ever completely invariant. In written language, uniform practice is quite close to being achieved – particularly in printed usage – but spoken language is less amenable to standardization. The pronunciation of English, for example, varies tremendously in the geographical and social dimensions, and it can change quite rapidly. A standard language, therefore, is an idealization – an idea in the mind rather than a fully achieved reality, and the varieties that we call **Standard English**, Standard French, etc., are not in fact completely invariant or totally immune to change.

The ideal of the standard always requires active maintenance, and to the extent that various factors (such as the educational system) contribute to maintenance, the presence of a standard variety may slow down the process of **language change**. The availability of a standard variety is in fact highly functional in human affairs, just as standardized weights and measures are so obviously functional. Standard varieties are comprehensible much more widely than localized **dialects** are. Furthermore, **elaboration** of function is one of the characteristics of a standard language: it can be used in a wide variety of different spheres of activity. Indeed, elaboration of function can be seen as one of the driving forces that encourage standardization. As the language becomes used in a greater and greater variety of functions, it becomes more and more important that a near-uniform variety should be available to fulfil all these functions. Just as the proliferation of varying coinages or weights and measures is dysfunctional, so a proliferation of different forms of the language would be highly undesirable in a society that requires widespread communications.

In history, the progressive standardization of weights and measures went hand in hand with the rise of capitalism and expansion of large-scale commercial activity, and something similar seems to have happened in language standardization. Medieval (pre-standard) varieties of language were highly divergent and variable. Although linguistic uniformity is particularly desirable in the case of legal, commercial and official written documents (as these require clarity and lack of ambiguity), the progress of standardization over the centuries has been broadly parallel to economic and technological progress. One of the consequences of this long-term drive towards uniformity in language use has been the spread of the standard ideology among speakers. We now turn to this, with attention to a number of interrelated and overlapping characteristics – the notion of **correctness**, the importance of **authority**, the relevance of **prestige**, and the idea of legitimacy.

CORRECTNESS AND AUTHORITY

An important consequence of language standardization has been the development of consciousness among speakers of a ‘correct’, or canonical, form of language. In standard-language cultures, virtually everyone subscribes to the idea of correctness. Some forms are believed to be right and others wrong, and this is generally taken for granted as common sense. Although rules of correctness are actually

superimposed upon the language from outside, they are considered by speakers to be rules inherent in the language itself. In this view, the utterance *I seen it*, for example, is *obviously* wrong, and *I saw it* is – equally obviously – correct. For the vast majority in a standard language culture, including very highly intelligent and educated people, this is just how it is: correctness rules are thought to be rules of language (not of society), and no justification is needed for rejecting *I seen it*. Sometimes a justification *is* given, e.g. that *seen* is the participle, not the past tense, but when this happens it is a rationalization after the fact. There is no rule inherent in language that restricts *seen* to the past participle and forbids it as a past tense form: the ‘correctness’ of *I saw it* depends solely on the fact that it has become the standard form of the past tense. In purely linguistic terms, the choice of one usage over another is entirely arbitrary. That is to say that if the standard variety had preferred *seen*, *I seen it* would be considered correct.

This arbitrariness is clearest in rules of spelling. Spelling is the most successfully standardized level of language, and variation in spelling is not normally tolerated. The spelling *sope*, for example, is considered wrong and the spelling *soap* right. Yet there is no reason why it should not be the other way round (in the eighteenth century, Dr Samuel Johnson’s dictionary accepted both spellings: similarly, *choak* and *choke*). In a standard language culture, however, the choice is not arbitrary: it is believed to be a *linguistic* fact that one is right and the other wrong. Everybody is supposed to know this – it is part of general knowledge to know it, and in a standard language culture it is your own fault if you cannot spell or if you speak incorrectly. It is believed to be open to everyone to learn what the correct forms are; therefore, it is thought to be quite proper to discriminate – in employment, for example – against people who use **non-standard** forms. Although it is now unacceptable to discriminate openly against someone for reasons of **ethnic** group, **social class**, religion or **gender**, it is still acceptable to discriminate openly on linguistic grounds. Unfortunately, people do not usually realize that language stands proxy for these other social categories. As a person who uses non-standard linguistic forms will often be from a minority ethnic group or a lower social class, the effect of language discrimination is to discriminate against ethnic minorities and lower social class groups.

The belief in correctness is an extremely important factor in what we have called the maintenance of a standard language, or, more precisely, maintenance of the consciousness of a standard, and this belief leads to a popular view that is directly contrary to what most linguistic theorists teach. Theorists generally teach that language is the possession of every native speaker – that it is primarily an internal development within the speaker’s mind, and that it is therefore essentially a cognitive phenomenon. In a standard language culture, however, a language is – by implication – the possession of only a few persons (usually not clearly specified) who have the authority to impose the rules of language on everyone else. This ideological position is already clear in the work of the writer Jonathan Swift (1712), who believed that a group of persons should be appointed to ‘fix’ the English language as a permanent uniform structure: ‘what I have most at heart’,

he wrote 'is, that some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our language for ever [. . .] For I am of Opinion, that it is better a language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing.' Underlying Swift's assumptions is the view that language is a cultural phenomenon – embedded in social affairs rather than an outgrowth of an individual's cognitive faculties – and this is in fact the popular view in any standard-language culture. Language is from this point of view analogous to cultural products such as art, law and religion, and it is felt to have an overarching presence outside the speaker and his/her immediate surroundings. For all these reasons, it makes perfect sense in such a culture to pass judgement on good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly in language.

The educational system becomes a crucial factor in spreading the knowledge of the standard language. Indeed, people find it reasonable to say that children go to school to 'learn English', when in fact in pre-school years they have already acquired the basis of spoken English grammar and phonology naturally and without explicit instruction. At school the child learns in particular to read and write, and **literacy** is acquired in the standard language. Thus, children are believed to be taught their native language at school through the agency of authorities who have privileged access to its mysteries, and of course it is knowledge of the standard written form that children acquire. It is characteristic of the standard ideology for people to believe that this uniform standard variety with all its superimposed rules of correctness is actually the language itself.

The maintenance of a standard language clearly depends on obedience to authority. For this purpose it is desirable that the standard language should be **codified**. Standard English, unlike most other varieties of English, has been codified over the centuries in the form of dictionaries, grammar books, pronunciation guides and manuals of usage, and these are routinely consulted as authorities on correctness. Although many of the handbooks on usage can be useful, particularly for writers of English, some of them (often glorying in titles such as *Improve your English!*) are ill informed, and their authors may even boast that they are scientists or engineers who are not qualified as linguistic experts. Frequently, they advocate usages that are out of date and condemn usages that are normal spoken English, such as 'It's me' and 'Who do you think you're talking to?' In some countries, overarching authority is enshrined in a national academy, such as the Académie française, which may have some legislative power (see Chapter 20). Such authorities commonly make pronouncements as to what is acceptable in the language concerned, but their most prominent activity is to condemn new usages that have entered the language, particularly words that are **borrowed** from another language. Thus, they are concerned not only with maintaining uniformity, but also with keeping the language 'pure'.

PRESTIGE

It was noted above that in selecting one usage out of two or more alternatives, the standardization process is indifferent as to which form is selected, and that in

practice other factors are involved in the process of selection. One of these is authority; another is **prestige**, to which we now turn. Most people will consider that one of the following sentences is in some sense 'better' than the other:

- (1) He was a man what didn't believe nothing.
- (2) He was a man who didn't believe anything.

It may be said that (2) has higher prestige than (1). It may further be claimed that the (standard) 'dialect' of (2) has higher prestige than the (non-standard) dialect of (1). It should be noted, however, that prestige is not primarily a property of a linguistic form or variety – it is a property of speakers, or groups of speakers, some of whom are accorded higher social prestige than others, and this is very clearly related to varying social class or social status. Thus, prestige is conferred on language varieties by speakers, and speakers tend to confer prestige on usages that are considered to be those of the higher social classes. At this point we also become involved with authority: some social groups have more authority than others. What is clear is that the selection process is highly sensitive to social and socio-political factors.

The converse of prestige is **stigma**. Linguistic forms that are favoured by the lower social classes tend to be stigmatized in the wider community, and these are typically the forms that are rejected in the educational system. Indeed, sometimes urban dialects are so heavily stigmatized that it is even claimed that their speakers do not know 'their own language'. The following comments by a school inspector in 1925 are an extreme example of the effects and workings of the standard ideology:

Come into a London elementary school and . . . [y]ou will notice that the boys and girls are almost inarticulate. They can make noises, but they cannot speak . . . listen to them as they 'play at schools'; you can barely recognise your native language.

Prestige, is, however, a slippery concept, as individuals may differ in assigning prestige to particular groups and hence to particular uses of language. In particular, it is not necessarily true that the dialect of the very highest social group is the main contributor to a standard variety. On the contrary, sociolinguistic inquiries suggest strongly that the dialects of small elite groups are generally recessive. In Britain, for example, the speech of the heir to the throne seems to be rather old-fashioned, and younger members of the royal family are more in tune with current middle-class speech. In the United States, the upper classes of Boston and New York had no effect whatever on what became the American 'Network Standard' pronunciation. What becomes the standard appears to be determined largely by those who depend for their livelihood on communicating widely in society; for example, business people, lawyers, journalists. The relative prestige of certain such groups may play a part in determining what becomes standard, and some of these people may possibly model their speech on a social group that they perceive to be

above them, but a standard language is not the direct product of the language of the highest social groups, such as the very rich or the aristocracy.

LEGITIMACY

The establishment of the idea of a standard variety, the diffusion of knowledge of this variety, its codification in widely used grammar books and dictionaries, and its promotion in a wide range of functions – all lead to the devaluing of other varieties. The standard form becomes the legitimate form, and other forms become, in the popular mind, illegitimate. They are commonly referred to as non-standard or even sub-standard. Historical linguists have been prominent in establishing this legitimacy, because it is important that a standard language, being the language of a nation state, and sometimes a great empire, should share in the (glorious) history of that nation state. Indeed, the language is commonly seen as part of the identity of the nation state. In the 1920s the influential language historian H.C. Wyld regarded the standard variety as the most important ‘dialect’ and based his history of English on it. He claimed that other dialects were irrelevant except in so far as they had contributed to the history of the standard. To that extent, these dialects had a degree of legitimacy: Victorian dialectologists had demonstrated that these rural forms might be useful in reconstructing early stages of English. These dialects, therefore, had *histories*. With urban vernaculars, however, it was quite otherwise.

Urban forms of English, although probably used by a majority of the population at that time, were not considered to be ‘dialects’ at all: they were seen by Wyld (doubtless in agreement with general opinion) as vulgar and ignorant attempts to adopt or imitate the standard. Thus, they were thought to have no independent histories and were therefore illegitimate offspring. Since then, written histories of English from around 1500 have until quite recently usually been designed as histories of the internal structure of only one variety – standard English. This is seen as also including the language of literature, as the work of great authors also helps to confer legitimacy (and prestige) on the language. (If we can say that English is ‘the language of Shakespeare’, we are conferring additional honour upon it.) Histories of English are largely *codifications* of the history of the standard language, and these codifications are themselves part of the process of the legitimization of the standard language in its function as the language of the nation state and its colonies and ex-colonies. The historicization of the language requires that it should possess a continuous unbroken history, a respectable and legitimate ancestry and a long pedigree, and historical linguists have certainly conferred these things on English – but chiefly, as we have seen, on its standard variety.

We can conclude by noting that all standard languages have to be given some form of legitimacy, and all have to be maintained and protected through authority and doctrines of correctness. There is usually also a tradition of popular complaint about language, bewailing the low quality of general usage and claiming that the language is degenerating. This too contributes to keeping the standard ideology

prominent in the public mind. In standard language cultures, the alternative to all this is too terrible to contemplate: it is believed that if these efforts at maintenance are neglected, the language will be subject to corruption and decay, and will ultimately disintegrate. The future of the language, it is claimed, cannot be left to the millions of fluent native speakers who use it every day: if it is not taken care of by privileged authorities, it will inevitably decline.

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